

# To Vote or Not to Vote: Lost Between the Ballot and Boycott

**H**ow did Georgia arrive at the point where elections have turned into a hollow exercise, stripped of real choice and reduced to mere formality? Georgian citizens face a dilemma, relevant for any future elections in 2028 or before. Should they participate in a process that no longer brings meaningful change, or should they abstain, as many did this October, signaling their refusal to legitimize an empty ritual? Political parties face a similar conundrum. On one hand, parties cannot survive without a functioning political process, and competing in elections is the very purpose of their existence, also determining their financing and political venues for confronting the ruling party. On the other hand, when there is no genuine possibility of voting the ruling party out due to its total control of state institutions and manipulation of information, participation becomes meaningless.

## To Vote, or Not to Vote?

What made the October 4 elections different is not only that the outcome was widely seen as predetermined, but also that both participation and abstention carried heavy symbolic and practical consequences. Participation risked legitimizing an electoral ritual that no longer functioned as a mechanism of accountability, yet abstention risked accelerating the disappearance of politics altogether. In previous parliamentary elections, voting at least offered a sense of engagement and a chance, however slim, to influence outcomes.

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These elections highlighted the fractured choices confronting both citizens and political actors. The two largest opposition parties (*Coalition for Change* and the *United National Movement*), as well as a string of smaller opposition parties loosely united around the fifth President, Salome Zourabichvili, have chosen to boycott, arguing that competing in a predetermined contest only legitimized authoritarian rule. Others, such as Mamuka Khazaradze's *Lelo - Strong Georgia* and Giorgi Gakharia's *For Georgia*, joined the race, reasoning that elections remained the only viable pathway to political change.

Ordinary voters, meanwhile, were caught in an equally difficult position. Many were fed up, confused, and angry, uncertain of whom to support, even if they were convinced that they must vote against the ruling regime. Moreover, many citizens also faced a difficult choice: whether to travel to their home regions to invest their vote in the lost battle or to stay in Tbilisi and join the protest rallies organized on election day.

Participation in the 4 October local elections thus became a choice between validating the *status quo* or expressing protest, with little to no expectation of change. Abstention, while often framed as an act of protest, created its own perils. The ruling regime weaponized low turnout to argue that the opposition lacked public support, while the GD received almost the same number of votes as in 2024. In fact, *Lelo - Strong Georgia*'s votes were halved compared to 2024, and *For Georgia* received only a third of its 2024 tally.

Obviously, a joint and coordinated boycott could have been a better option as a unified decision of the entire opposition spectrum. The second-best option could have been a joint decision to participate. However, any decision that lacked unity was poised to result in a cycle of mutual distrust: citizens now feel abandoned by the opposition, citizen mobilization is no longer linked to political parties,

and various opposition groups have lost whatever trust they had in one another.

This paradox makes the 2025 local elections a turning point. The main question that the opposition parties will have to answer as of 5 October is, "Will they take part in the next elections, if nothing changes?" A negative answer to this question will be very difficult to justify and, in the absence of alternative mechanisms of the political struggle, will be equivalent to a political suicide. A positive answer, however, will require a lot of explanations for those who are disillusioned with the elections and believe in the total isolation of the regime at home or abroad. If unsuccessful, this process will lead to further entrenchment of the ruling regime and a more straightforward pathway to authoritarian consolidation.

## Distorted Battlefield of 2025

The reasons behind the dilemmas of participation and abstention become clearer when placed against the backdrop of Georgia's current pre-election environment. Local observer groups [described](#) the OSCE/ODIHR's final [assessment](#) of the October 2024 parliamentary elections as extremely critical, citing it as grounds for new elections. OSCE pointed to rushed and frequent changes to election law that appeared politically instrumental, a degraded method of composing election commissions that weakened independence, the persistent blurring of party and state through the extensive use of administrative resources, and widespread intimidation and pressure on voters, especially public employees and vulnerable groups. The key to the GD's success, it turns out, was the secrecy-of-the-vote violation, reified through leaked ballots, crowding and tensions at polling stations, and the filming of voters by representatives of the ruling party. These concerns are not confined to the past. They are just as relevant today and for any future elections.

[The European Parliament](#) and the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly ([PACE](#)) also shared these assessments and expressed their position at various times that only genuinely free and fair elections could de-escalate the political crisis in Georgia.

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According to the V-Dem [Democracy Report](#) 2025, Georgia has undergone a clear regime reclassification, moving from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy. The report identified systematic manipulation of media, repression of civil society, and the erosion of election guarantees as defining features of the country's political transformation. These findings confirmed that the very taxonomy of Georgia's electoral system has changed. As a result, the logic that once guided opposition parties, voters, and international partners, assuming that participation could still serve as a vehicle for democratic correction, no longer applies. This shift means that elections in Georgia no longer meet the minimal standards of competitiveness, fairness, and institutional independence that define electoral democracy.

The 2025 pre-election [assessment](#) by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) presented a significantly more dire picture of deterioration. It highlighted a deepening political crisis, democratic backsliding, and human rights concerns as the broader context for the vote. It detailed fundamental changes to the local electoral system, as well as amendments adopted only months before the vote, and the planned use of electronic voting in many precincts, despite unresolved concerns from 2024 about ballot secrecy.

Most importantly, in the run-up to the local elec-

tions, almost all opposition party leaders ended up in [prison](#) or were under investigation. The opposition party's finances have been depleted, as they were stripped of budgetary support, and the media environment has further deteriorated, including the [closure](#) of one of the country's major television channels, TV Mtavari, and the [arrest](#) of the Editor-in-Chief of online media outlets *Netgazeti* and *Batumelebi*. These developments collectively show that the playing field has tilted even more heavily in favor of the ruling party. And for many, this was a sufficient ground to boycott the elections.

On top of an already grave political context, the pre-election [legal](#) environment for Georgia's 2025 municipal elections has significantly worsened in terms of legislation and administration. Recent amendments have removed the 40 percent threshold that previously checked the dominance of any single party in local majoritarian contests and altered seat allocation rules to favor higher-performing parties, reducing proportionality and making the system less fair. Laws restricting the rights of observers and tightening regulations on civil society and foreign financing have further constrained oversight.

The composition of the Central Election Commission has become more unbalanced following this year's changes; electoral commissions can now be selected with weaker safeguards for neutrality and institutional independence. Accelerated legislative changes made oversight by courts and dispute resolution mechanisms less effective.

But perhaps most alarming is the deterioration in election observation. Traditional, credible observer missions, including the [OSCE/ODIHR](#), stated that they could not monitor the vote after Georgian Dream's last-minute invitation less than a month before polling day. ISFED did not deploy long-term or short-term observers at polling stations for the local elections, refusing even the parallel vote tabulation it had conducted in previous



cycles, citing that fundamental rights, the stability of electoral law, and procedural guarantees had not been met. Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) and Transparency International Georgia also [refused](#) to deploy observation missions, breaking with decades-long practice. Each cited a repressive political environment and the absence of conditions necessary for free and fair elections. In their absence, the roster of local monitoring groups was dominated by government-aligned organizations, several of which have been accused of manipulating observation processes to benefit the ruling Georgian Dream party in the 2024 elections. Journalist [investigations](#) also revealed that individuals affiliated with the ruling party and local authorities were accredited as “observers” and were seen accompanying voters to polling booths.

## Predetermined Outcomes

Nothing about the October 4 local elections came as a surprise. From the start, the process followed a familiar script, rehearsed in Georgia's previous election cycles and perfected under Georgian Dream's consolidated control of the electoral system. Polling stations opened on time. Turnout was low, predictably so. The [official figure](#)—40.93% nationwide—was the lowest in the country's post-independence history, reflecting the public's deep-seated conviction that their vote would have no impact. In Tbilisi, only 31.08% of registered voters participated in the election. These numbers make it clear that most Georgians perceived the outcome as already predetermined and stayed home.

The results also confirmed what everyone already knew. Georgian Dream swept the country, winning all 64 municipalities and dominating local councils with over 80% of the vote. In Tbilisi, the incumbent mayor was declared victor with 71.7% of the vote—on paper. In reality, this amounted to the support of just over a quarter of the city's eligible voters. But this is not the number that mattered.

The only number the GD cared about was to show that its support remained steady. GD received over 210,000 votes in Tbilisi in 2025, up from around 193,000 in 2021, 205,000 in 2017, and 151,000 in 2014.

Even the election day protest and its outcome were anticipated. That at least 50,000 people would take to the streets after the elections was no surprise. Nor was it unexpected that certain political leaders, who had been calling for a “peaceful revolution” in the days leading up to 4 October, would step forward, call for disobedience, and urge demonstrators to occupy government buildings. That they would fail was also obvious. That the authorities would respond with swift detentions of the organizers was entirely predictable.

Government figures, including the GD Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, immediately [branded](#) the 4 October rally an attempted coup, blaming it on foreign-backed radicals. The accusations were prepackaged. The placards hadn't even been lifted before the narrative was ready to be deployed. And what will follow now is just as foreseeable: a broader crackdown, more arrests, legal cases, outlawing of opposition parties, and suffocation of NGOs and independent media.

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4 October was also a test of endurance, a demonstration that resistance persists. And in that sense, they succeeded. Daily protests continued after the election, proving that while the system is rigged, the defiance is not yet extinguished.

## Lessons Learnt – Losers Everywhere

The 4 October elections and a protest rally showcased several lessons, but whether Georgia's political spectrum or public will learn from them is anyone's guess.

Those who chose to participate appeared as losers because the outcome was predetermined. The votes they received were considerably less than in 2024. From this perspective, their argument – that if the entire opposition had participated, GD would have lost – lacks credibility.

Those who chose to boycott the elections also suffered a loss. Their moral stance did not translate into mass mobilization or substantial pressure, which would have made the Georgian Dream retreat. Furthermore, the failure of the ill-coordinated and under-resourced “[peaceful revolution](#)” further undermined the notion that street protests can lead to change.

Other pro-democracy and pro-European forces also lost. The looming crackdown of the GD on political activists, demonstrators, civil society organizations, media, and universities, wrapped in the narrative of preventing and punishing participants of the “foreign-backed subversion,” will cripple the protests further and will give the law enforcement machinery a new pretext to intensify repression of pro-democracy actors with greater confidence.

Opposition political parties will now become the primary target. The GD has already announced that it will outlaw the opposition parties – the

“collective UNM.” On 6 October, GD's Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [clarified](#) who these parties were – the four parties that cleared the threshold in the October 2024 parliamentary elections (Coalition for Change, United National Movement, Coalition Strong Georgia, and For Georgia), plus smaller parties that are “offshoots of the UNM.” In short, everyone on the pro-European opposition front.

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The pre-election period showed that this ever-increasing fragmentation between participating and boycotting parties, between civic groups and political parties, and between domestic actors and their Western partners has consistently served the interests of the ruling regime. Georgian Dream thrives on divisions and capitalizes on the indecisiveness of Western partners, who limit themselves to cautious statements while the government applies violence and coercion with impunity.

## Strength in Unity

The message engraved on Georgia's coat of arms, “Strength is in Unity,” now reads less as a historical motto and more as a political imperative. The only sustainable path forward for Georgia's democracy lies in restoring unity among its fragmented pro-democracy forces and between them

and their civil society colleagues and international partners. Only a unified strategy, built on coordination, courage, and consistency, can halt Georgia's slide toward authoritarianism and reclaim the democratic European future that its citizens still believe is possible.

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These elections demonstrated that neither participation nor abstention can bring about democratic change at the current stage of authoritarian consolidation. What might alter the trajectory, though, is a coordinated and realistic strategy built on joint effort, shared objectives, pooled resources, and a clear communication strategy. Speaking with a single voice to international allies would not hurt either.

It is a fact that Georgia's democratic opposition

has consistently lacked a coherent plan or effective communication strategy. Each tactical or strategic decision, whether joining the race or withdrawing from it, going to prison, or protesting symbolically, was poorly explained, was often reactive, and rarely connected to a broader vision that voters could understand or rally behind. Moreover, each position was juxtaposed with the positions of other opposition colleagues, which further sowed discord among the anti-GD pro-European electorate. Most importantly, these actions were entirely detached from the larger program of improving the lives of ordinary Georgians.

This inconsistency eroded public trust, allowing government propaganda to portray the opposition as opportunistic and disorganized. Until opposition parties focus on their actions rather than their words, and until the political process shifts from television talk shows to the villages, town halls, and cities of Georgia, where routine day-to-day discussions with regular Georgians occur, the TV addresses alone will not translate into meaningful political outcomes. Neither will the ongoing protest on Rustaveli Avenue, even if maintaining it is crucial, for both symbolic and practical reasons ■